

## INL Nuclear Energy Programs:

Building upon its legacy responsibilities, infrastructure and expertise the INL's nuclear energy mission is to develop advanced nuclear technologies that provide clean, abundant, affordable and reliable energy to the United States and the world. We support our government's role in leading the revitalization of the nation's nuclear power industry and re-establishing U.S. world leadership in nuclear science and technology.

When sponsorship of the INL was formally transferred to the DOE Office of Nuclear Energy, Science and Technology, specific roles and responsibilities were assigned to Idaho's national laboratory in the areas of Generation IV nuclear power systems, advanced fuel cycles and enabling technologies, systems and practices.

These new assignments came, in part, as acknowledgement of the INL's unique status as the DOE site that designed and constructed 52 reactors since its establishment in 1949 as the National Reactor Testing Station. For many years, it was the site of the largest concentration of nuclear reactors in the world. Notable among these Idaho reactors were Experimental Breeder Reactor I, the first reactor to generate usable electricity from nuclear power, the U.S. Navy's first prototype nuclear propulsion plant and the world's most capable test reactor, the Advanced Test Reactor.

The INL has the history, infrastructure, expertise and commitment to collaborate broadly — characteristics required to fulfill our assigned role as the nation's center for nuclear energy research and development. We also have the expertise, infrastructure and strategic partnerships necessary to advance the state of the art in:

- Nuclear safety analysis
- Irradiation services
- Nuclear operations
- Management of spent nuclear fuel
- Biocorrosion of fuels

**For more information feel free to contact us:**

**Speakers Bureau:** INL Tours:

Keith Arterburn Don Miley  
(208) 526-4845 (208) 526-0050  
keith.arterburn@inl.gov donald.miley@inl.gov

**Community Donations:**

Lori Priest (208) 526-9154, lori.priest@inl.gov

Or, visit our website at [www.inl.gov](http://www.inl.gov)

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## WELCOME TO EXPERIMENTAL BREEDER REACTOR-I (EBR-I)



### SELF-GUIDED TOUR OF EBR-I

On December 20, 1951, EBR-I became the first power plant to produce electricity using atomic energy. From the next day until decommissioning in 1964, EBR-I generated enough electricity to supply all the power for its own building whenever the reactor operated. This folder will guide you through EBR-I and give you an idea of how atomic energy is used to make electricity. Along the tour route, many exhibits help tell the EBR-I story. If you have any questions during your visit, ask the tour guide on duty. We hope you'll enjoy your visit.

#### CLIMB THE STAIRS TO THE FIRST TOUR STOP.

**1.** The universe is composed of tiny particles called atoms. Atoms of uranium-235 were used at EBR-I to generate electricity. As shown in the illustration, a uranium-235 atom splits or fissions when struck by a neutron. The splitting atom produces heat and waste products, and releases two or three neutrons. If those neutrons strike other uranium-235 atoms, they in turn split, yielding heat and still more neutrons in a **chain reaction**.

At EBR-I, such a chain reaction was harnessed to generate electricity and also to demonstrate that more new fuel could be created than the reactor "burned." Creating nuclear fuel is possible because of a property of natural uranium. Less than 1 percent of it is the fissionable uranium-235. The rest is another kind of uranium called uranium-238, which does not readily split. Instead, a neutron is absorbed by a uranium-238 atom, which then changes into plutonium-239, a fissionable atom and a good reactor fuel. Thus, EBR-I was a **breeder** since it "bred" more plutonium-239 atoms than the uranium atoms it consumed.



**2.** As power plants go, EBR-I was unusual mainly in the kind of fuel it used. Coal- or oil-fired power plants **burn** their fuel to heat water to make steam. This steam drives a turbine that generates electricity. At EBR-I, the nuclear fuel created heat by means of a **fission chain reaction**. The heat was carried from the reactor core by liquid metal, which in turn heated a second system of liquid metal. The liquid metal was a combination of sodium (Na) and potassium (K). It was called "NaK." The second system containing NaK then heated water to make steam to drive the turbine/generator.

**GO OUT THE DOOR ON YOUR LEFT AND TURN RIGHT TO THE CONTROL ROOM.**

**3.** Like all power plants, EBR-I had a control room. From this room, scientists started and stopped the chain reaction and controlled the equipment for making electricity.

**WHEN YOU'RE READY, GO OUT THE DOOR ON YOUR LEFT TO STOP #4.**

**4.** You are now standing above the reactor – a nuclear heat source or furnace. When the reactor operated, the thick concrete walls surrounding it shielded personnel from radiation. The uranium fuel was placed in long, thin, stainless steel rods like these on display. The fuel rods were lowered into the reactor core through the hole in front of you. Fission took place in the core, producing heat and breeding more fuel. There is no fuel in the reactor now.



Notice the exhibit entitled "Breeding Blanket." Located in the basement – directly beneath the reactor core – this reflector cup served as the reactor's "on-off" control. When the cup was raised to surround the core, the reactor heated up. The reactor shut down when the cup was lowered away from the core. Neutrons could escape easily from the small basketball-sized core and be absorbed by the surrounding

shielding. The uranium-238 reflector around the core absorbed some of the neutrons to make new fuel and bounced enough other neutrons back into the core to maintain the fission chain reaction. Raising or lowering the reflector cup, by means of an elevator, controlled the rate of the reaction.

**WHEN YOU'RE READY, GO BACK THROUGH THE CONTROL ROOM TO THE HANDRAIL AND TURN RIGHT TO THE NEXT STOP.**

**5.** Steam created by the reactor's heat rotated this turbine. The turbine turned the generator to make electricity. The first electricity generated at EBR-I illuminated four light bulbs like the ones seen here. They are strung just as the original bulbs were in 1951. On that historic day, EBR-I staff members chalked their names on the wall opposite you to commemorate their achievement.

**WATCH YOUR STEP GOING DOWNSTAIRS.**

**6.** In this room the heat from the second liquid metal system converted water into high temperature steam. The steam was then piped to the turbine/generator where it produced electricity as you saw in stop #5.

**NOW FOLLOW THE YELLOW LINES TO STOP #7.**

**7.** This plaque was installed by President Lyndon B. Johnson and Dr. Glenn T. Seaborg, Chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, during the dedication ceremony in 1966 designating EBR-I as a Registered National Historic Landmark.

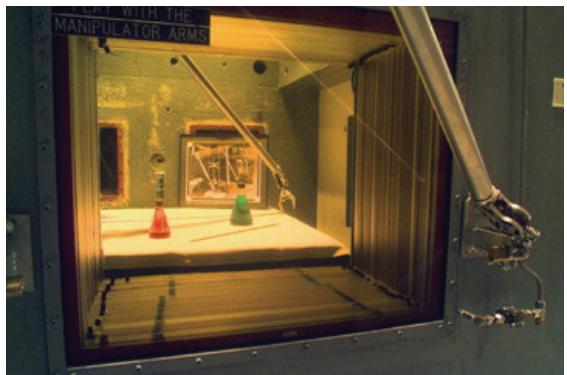
**CONTINUE TO THE FUEL STORAGE VAULT.**

**8.** The nuclear fuel was inside stainless steel rods (actually only in the lower section of the rods). Extra fuel rods were stored as you see

them in this vault. Before they were used in the reactor, the rods were not very radioactive and could be handled safely without shielding. After the fission process occurs in the reactor the rods become highly radioactive. Behind you is a large cask, which, when lifted by the crane overhead, safely moved the highly radioactive used fuel rods from place to place.

**GO TO YOUR LEFT TO THE ROD FARM.**

**9.** Some radioactive liquid metal remained on the fuel rods when they were removed from the reactor core. Liquid metal was washed off in the hole covered by the bright metal plate in the floor to your left. Rods were then stored in the individually numbered holes, known collectively as the rod farm. The chalkboard was used to keep track of the used rod inventory.



**WALK ALONG THE YELLOW RAILING TO THE HOT CELL.**

**10.** You are looking into the hot cell, used for inspection and repair of radioactive materials. The window's 34 layers (total thickness of 39 inches) and 39 inch-thick walls provided radiation protection. The manipulators are the first ever devised for remote handling of

radioactive materials. Mechanical "hands" inside the hot cell duplicated every motion applied to the controls by an operator who stood outside the cell, where protection from penetrating radiation was provided by the thick concrete walls and the specially designed windows.

**TURN BACK AND WALK TO STOP #11.**

**11.** These three manipulators are of a later generation than the one just visited. Try your hand at stacking or positioning the blocks. Please take care when using the manipulators.

**TURN TO YOUR RIGHT AND GO DOWN THE STAIRS TO THE NEXT STOP.**

**12.** Neutrons could escape easily from the small, basketball-sized core. But the uranium-238 reflector around the core absorbed some of the neutrons to make new fuel and bounced enough other neutrons back into the core to maintain the fission chain reaction. Raising or lowering the cup-shaped reflector, by means of the elevator you see through the window, controlled the rate of the reaction. This reflector cup served as the reactor's "on-off" control. When the cup was raised to surround the core, the reactor heated up. The reactor shut down when the cup was lowered away from the core.

**WATCH YOUR HEAD AS YOU ENTER!**

**13.** This is the reflector repair room. A reflector made of uranium-238 "bricks" surrounded the reactor core. When penetrated by neutrons, the atoms of uranium-238 converted to plutonium-239, the new fuel bred at EBR-I. Using the machinery around you, an operator looking through the window could remove and replace the bricks one by one.

**WATCH YOUR HEAD AS YOU LEAVE THE ROOM. ONCE OUTSIDE, TURN RIGHT AND GO AROUND THE CORNER TO THE WINDOW LOOKING INTO THE REFLECTOR REPAIR ROOM.**

**14.** Look through the window into the reflector repair room. Notice how dim the room appears. The lead windows absorb not only radiation, but also light. The bank of bright lights above the window inside the room compensated for the light loss.

**15.** Through the window above, you can see the area where heat from the liquid metal in the reactor was transferred to the second system of liquid metal.

This ends your tour of EBR-I. We invite you to inspect the building further, including the exhibit area which is to your left when you reach the top of the stairs. You may also seek out the tour guides for more detailed information. Help yourself to the handout material in the exhibit area, and please visit the two aircraft nuclear engine prototypes next to the parking lot. We hope you enjoyed your tour.

